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The Women: 8 Films
An Explanation, of Sorts

Jane Topping, Programme Leader BA (Hons) Fine Art, University of Cumbria

These films were first shown as part of solo exhibition *The Women*, 8 Mar – 20 Apr 2013, Patricia Fleming Projects, Glasgow.

Press Release:

Jane Topping's solo exhibition *The Women* references paranoid gothic texts, costume and gender definition to interrogate the power play of relationships.

Topping uses repetition and mirroring to highlight the anxiousness that accompanies looking and being looked at. Duty and desire, devotion and decadence are revealed in *The Women* through a collection of screen prints, collage and drawing.

Jane Topping is a graduate of The Glasgow School of Art Painting Department. Solo shows include: *Cuckoo Revue*, The Glasgow School of Art, *They are the We of Me*, Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art and *Persuasion*, Intermedia at the CCA. Topping has exhibited in group shows internationally, the most recent, *The Irregular Correct: New Art From Glasgow*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Australia, 2012.

About the exhibition: *The Women*

The title references the 1939 film of the same name. The title sequence of this film swaps the (all female) actors/characters faces for animals[1]. I could describe it, but here's a Wikipedia cheat:

'*The Women* is a 1939 American **comedy-drama film** directed by **George Cukor**. The film is based on **Clare Boothe Luce's play of the same name**.

The film continued the play's all-female tradition—the entire cast of more than 130 speaking roles was female. Set in the glamorous **Manhattan** apartments of high society evoked by **Cedric Gibbons**, and in **Reno** where they obtain their divorces, it presents an acidic commentary on the pampered lives and power struggles of various rich, bored wives and other women they come into contact with.

Throughout *The Women*, not a single male is seen — although the males are much talked about, and the central theme is the women's relationships with them. **Lesbianism** is intimated in the portrayal of only one character, Nancy Blake. The attention to detail was such that even in props such as portraits only female figures are represented, and several animals which appeared as pets were also female.'

The work in the exhibition consisted of screen prints, collage, drawing & sculpture, together acting as a framing device for the films. The show as a whole explored changes of gender, dressing up,

preparation before public display & the monotony of social constructs (specifically gender specific ones). Mirrors were presented as other objects, operating as a crown, a moon & a phallus[3] rather than as a reflection of self. This misappropriation of form acted to undermine a feminine, narcissistic relationship with reflection and the permanent inability to escape it (due to the city's shop windows, glass buildings & so on). The 'mirrors' in *The Women* were not reflective – they didn't work.[4]

Interrogating Judith Butler's assertion that we are always in drag, the exhibition as a whole operated to place the viewer 'back stage', both actually and psychologically. Here was the daily self-conscious staging of the public persona revealed. Of particular focus was the complex business of female gender construction via clothing and mannerisms (where the mannerisms are manifest in the differing voices available in the texts).[5]

About the work *The Women: 8 Films*

In the films, appropriation and repetition is used to create anxiousness and to reveal otherwise unnoticed moments of boredom. A huge influence is the Dana Birnbaum film *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1977).[6] In one film, a 'headless' woman repeatedly proffers snacks at a party, seemingly trapped in an endless loop. This mundane, expected action of hosting is contrasted with Carly Simon lyrics assuring us '*you don't need to show me that you're beautiful*'. The contradiction here, of course, is that there are in-built societal mechanisms & rituals which demand that we indeed must do just that.

All the films are self-consciously self-referential. As a reflection of the way that one becomes amazed and then enthralled by the potential of a new medium, the films constantly refer to their own making. All the texts are taken from my own writing about my work, past, current & future. Often these texts refer to an unravelling of ambition for the work itself, for instance, '*I dance, or at least walk, or talk, or whatever*'. This is something that comes up in almost everything I make – preparation & making are foregrounded in the final work. This is an attempt at a form of sincerity, which perhaps makes the work more palatable for the viewer.[7]

None of the films use 'new' footage, but instead appropriate short clips from existing films[8]. The sources of the clips are unimportant in the context of the final pieces, but are of academic interest since the originals are generally concerned with similar issues to the work itself.[9] *The Women: 8 Films* makes use of the following:

Sunset Boulevard (1950, dir. **Billy Wilder**): The ultimate preparation for the character's 'close up', 2 films use this as their basis.

Desperately Seeking Susan (1985, dir. **Susan Seidelman**): The frustrated housewife swaps places with the glamorous street-wise woman – a body switch which relies on clothing as a signal of morals & aims. I've used clips which are unrecognisable, even to a DSS aficionado. Both are scenes from Rosanna Arquette's dull, pre-Susan life.

Liquid Sky (1982, dir. **Slava Tsukerman**): The female lead actress also plays the male lead character in this film of sex, drugs and aliens. The text in this piece suggests pouring talcum powder onto a cat's head – a nod to both Tarkovsky's *Mirror* & Northern Soul dance habits.

Fade to Black (1980, dir. **Vernon Zimmerman**): The main character of this film (male) dresses up & takes on the look (& so persona) of various Hollywood film characters & actors.[10] He then goes on to commit multiple murders 'in character'. As with the title sequence (of the 1939 film) *The Women*, the difference between character & actor is not easily defined. In my piece, the main character is becoming Bella Lugosi. The text which accompanies this film is an invented transformation spell.

The portrait of the young woman, which makes up one entire film, is by Peter Mitchell, my great grandfather.[11] The sitter is unknown. The song *Montre Moi Ton Visage* by Desire accompanies the image. The film lingers for uncomfortable lengths of time on her lips, her nose & finally her face. The viewer looks from one face to the next to the next, trying to discern tiny differences or movement. Forced to examine and inspect in this way creates an inappropriate & uncomfortable intimacy between the viewer & the sitter.

1. 2.

3.

1. *The Women (C'mon)*, Screen print and cut-out digital print, 2013, 200 x 175cm[12]
2. *The Women (Moon)*, Latex and silver leaf on hardboard, 2013, 30 x 30cm[13]
3. *The Women (Passions) (Detail)*, Graphite on paper and dress trousers, 2013, 130 x 46cm[14]

[1] Something that is pretty shocking to contemporary eyes. I first saw this film while on a flight to New York in 2010 so its compelling oddness & knee trembling retrograde styling was probably intensified by my own personal feelings of displacement and excitement, the hallmarks of solo air travel.

[2][http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Women_\(1939_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Women_(1939_film)) accessed 27/06/13

[3]Please refer to the images at the end of this text.

[4] Breathe a sigh of relief.

[5]As a tribute to David Foster Wallace, this text pinches his occasional habit of making ridiculous use of footnoting and colloquial language in order to speak in multiple voices. These should, if I am doing this right, give you dear reader a feeling of closeness to not just the text, but the author too. Really, this is using the post-modern strategy of metanarrative towards a modernist end. Whither this strategy is 1. effective or 2. appropriate in the context of a Doctorial Colloquium, I leave you to decide.

[6]I can't tell you the number of times I've watched this since I first saw it in the excellent exhibition *TV as...* 28/08/10 – 15/05/11, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

[7] Just as someone who wants to be liked might reveal too much personal information to a relative stranger at a party in an attempt to get closer to them, the object of their desire. Love, love me do.

[8] And let's not get into copyright infringement here. Intellectual property is a moral issue, though an extremely slippery business and the constriction of the footnote does not allow for a satisfying discussion of it here. Suffice to say that appropriation has played a significant role in the history & development of the arts since Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). The use of the term recontextualisation allows me to sleep at night.

[9] That's why I seek them out & watch them.

[10] The clothes make the man after all.

[11] Extract from an obituary written for the Queen's Park School Magazine, 1950, author unknown: *'With his upper-school pupils he held from time to time informal discussions at which he allowed his mind to wander almost at random over the whole artistic field, and fascinated his audience by his wide range of general knowledge. His quiet, unassuming manner and his imperturbability, so unusual in a creative artist, could never conceal the strength of will and intellect which lay just below the surface.'*

[12] This piece became a kind of dressing table. 'C'mon' is a favourite word of mine, but particularly when it is used in songs as rousing call to arms, rather than with a cynical tone in everyday speech.

[13] You can't really see the silver leaf in this image – it's covered by the latex and can only be seen if you are standing in front of the piece with your head tilted towards the left. This piece is reminiscent of the Jewish tradition of covering mirrors while sitting Shiva I realise after the event.

[14] This drawing is of the title or logo of *Passions*, the 2- American soap to use paranormal characters in the plot (Dark Shadows being the 1-) which aired in 2007-2008. This piece was used as a tone setter really – cheeky &, well, a little flaccid.